

Fifty years ago, the unearthing of a *strange mummy-like coffin* created considerable interest in the quiet town of Salem, Ohio.

Graves in the abandoned and long-neglected Baptist cemetery on Depot Street, the second oldest burying ground in the town, were being removed to make way for construction of a religious printing concern. Deeded to the Baptist church in 1809 for a house of worship and burial purposes, the two town-lots were condemned by state authorities in the 1880s, and by 1928 the cemetery had been desecrated by years of neglect. Some headstones were retrieved from nearby properties, where they had been incorporated into steps and sidewalks, but of the 293 bodies exhumed, only twelve could be identified. These included two veterans of the War of 1812 and David Gaskill, a prominent Salem pioneer and one of the founders of both the first manufacturing concern in the town and the original Baptist church. The few graves identified in the old cemetery dated from 1826 to 1855.

According to newspaper accounts, no "jewelry, trinkets or other luxurious worldly valuables were found by workers during the excavation." The newspaper reporter concluded that "The

The Salem "Mummy"

people of early Salem were a hard working, God-fearing frugal, honest class that knew no luxury." Be that as it may, the final day of excavations at the cemetery produced the unusual, elaborate, and presumably costly, metallic burial casket shown here.

Six and a half feet long and weighing more than 600 pounds, the cast-iron "mummy" bore a small glass octagonal face plate or window. Bolts set at eight-inch intervals held the ornate lid in place. Although the coffin also bore a name plate, there was no inscription on it; if there ever had been one, it had long since disappeared. The fancy iron coffin produced a sensation when it was uncovered, and police finally had to disperse the crowd of hundreds of curious onlookers.

Local historians searched early town records in vain for any clue as to the name of the casket's occupant. After being displayed for several weeks, the unusual coffin was placed in an unmarked plot in Grandview Cemetery. Joseph Birkheimer, who discovered and excavated the "mummy" coffin, re-

called years later that the decision to reinter it was a direct result of his having apprehended two young boys trying to pry open the coffin, temporarily stored in his barn.

Speculation regarding the identity of the coffin's inmate continued for some time, but the mystery remains unsolved today. Inquiries regarding the origin of the peculiar metal "mummy" were more successful, however. Initial theories were that the "special box" was imported from Europe; according to the newspaper, Salem foundries of the 1880s were not advanced enough to produce such a work. Alternatively, the newspaper reporter thought that "some old employe of the iron foundry in Salem might have constructed it for himself or one of his family, spending years on its manufacture."

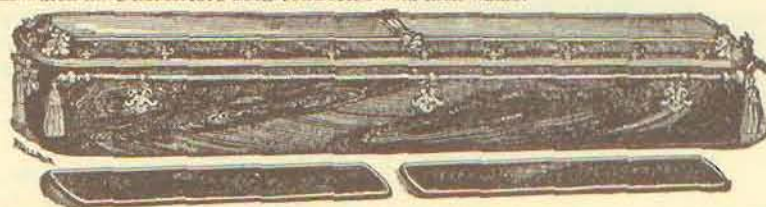
One Salem resident, A. R. Silver, went so far as to have samples of the casket analyzed by a metallurgist in an attempt to determine where it was manufactured. Results were inconclusive, but it appears that the remarkable

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CRANE, BREED & CO., MANUFACTURERS OF PATENT METALLIC BURIAL CASES AND CASKETS, AND HEARSEES, OFFICE AND MANUFACTORY, Eighth Street, West of Freeman Street, Cincinnati, Ohio.



Under their present improvements these Burial Cases are entirely free from those revolting suggestions which have heretofore been connected with their name.



THE METALLIC BURIAL CASKET

Is entirely devoid of those unpleasant associations which usually accompany the form of a Coffin. Heavy Polished Plate Glass extends nearly its whole length. With the elaborate Silver-plated Mountings, as represented in the above Engraving, it surpasses in elegance anything of the kind which has ever before been offered to the Public.

These Burial Cases and Caskets are beautifully finished in imitation of the finest rosewood. Their invaluable qualities for ordinary interment, for transportation, and for preservation, are now universally acknowledged. They protect the remains of the departed from water, vermin, or other intrusion. Future removal, should it ever be desired, may be accomplished without inconvenience. A delay of days or weeks, awaiting the arrival of absent friends, is entirely practicable. When due attention is given to sealing, which may, with care, be accomplished by any one, (printed instructions accompanying each Case and Casket,) bodies may be carried to any part of the Globe at any season of the year, with perfect safety. They are moreover, a sure safeguard against contagious diseases. These advantages render them unequalled by anything which either in ancient or modern times has been invented for the reception of the human body after death.

An advertisement for Crane, Breed & Co.'s caskets and hearses (from Williams' Cincinnati Directory, June, 1864).



The cast-iron coffin excavated in 1928 from the Baptist cemetery, Salem, Ohio.

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mummy-like coffin was a product of a Cincinnati firm, Crane, Breed, & Co. Martin H. Crane patented a design for a metallic burial casket in 1856, and the available example of the company's ware closely resembles the Salem "mummy," including even the glass "porthole."

Crane, a Massachusetts native, began working as a clerk in the W. C. Davis & Co. foundry in 1853. Two years later, he, Abel D. Breed, also from Massachusetts and owner of the Queen City Varnish Co., and Col. John Mills, a prominent Marietta citizen who apparently provided the initial capital, formed Crane, Breed, & Co. Breed's son William joined the firm in 1861, becoming president when the company finally incorporated in 1882. By that time the company had a capital stock of half a million dollars. In addition to its patented metal coffins and burial cases, which were advertised as being

"entirely free from those revolting suggestions which have heretofore been connected with their name," the Cincinnati firm also manufactured many styles of hearses and other undertakers' supplies. Apparently the company did well, allowing Abel Breed to move first to Cleveland and then to New York, where he managed extensive mining interests while his son managed the casket factory. In 1880 the company provided work for 280 men, women, and children (at \$1.25 to \$2.50 per day). William James Breed and his wife Laura — she was a granddaughter of Dr. Samuel Adams — were also able to provide for a family of five, three servants, and a coachman.

Over the ensuing years, William Breed became prominent in Cincinnati philanthropic and religious life, particularly the Y.M.C.A. and the Society for the Suppression of Vice, before his death in 1908. The Crane and Breed Co. continued operations until the 1970s, although it retained no monopoly on metallic burial caskets. Currently there

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are at least three such manufacturers in Ohio, including companies in Columbus, Delaware, and Zanesville. The rather exotic Egyptian mummy motif once favored by our anonymous Salem pioneer or his family has decidedly gone out of fashion, however.

James L. Murphy
Library Division
